

# Jesus for UU's

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*Rev. Ann Marie Alderman*



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*“Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can’t stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they’ll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That’s love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There’s something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies. “ (from “Loving Your Enemies”)*

*- Martin Luther King Jr., from A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.*

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How many of you are familiar with the painting of Jesus in a white robe, with shoulder length brown wavy hair? In the painting I am referring to he has pale skin, a neatly trimmed beard, a sharp nose, thin lips, high cheek bones... He is looking out and up at something in the distance...

500 million copies of this portrait of Jesus are estimated to be in circulation. It has been said that it is the most common religious image in the world. For decades, especially in this country, this portrait was everywhere. It hung in nearly every Christian church, nearly every Christian child’s bedroom...and in living rooms. It was in the pockets of soldiers going off to war... in was in hospitals and offices, It hung in many school rooms, even in sandwich shops....everywhere!

According to Stephen Prothero who wrote *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, the image meant to depict Jesus became Jesus...at least in the minds of many, many Americans...in the minds of women, men, children, no matter what color they were... they knew what Jesus looked like.

The portrait and the person it represents, became one and the same. When that happened Jesus was no longer “belonged” to the institutional church founded upon his legacy. He no longer belonged to this or that worshiping congregation. Rather, the Jesus (the man we really “know” only a tiny amount of information about) became someone familiar and instantly recognizable to anyone and everyone. The man, the Son of God, the Savior, the Christ, previously known primarily through the interpretive lens of the various Christian faith traditions, became everyone’s always available superhero.

The portrait meant to make us think about the person known to us through the books of the New Testament, became the hero one need not study the bible to know...and know well.

The image created by an illustrator for a marketing campaign became an icon...and helped further what some call the "Jesus-only-religion". Individuals with no relationship with a faith community could love, adore, feel good about their relationship with, appeal to, ask favors of, claim to know this Jesus. Our Unitarian forebears played a part in the creation of this distinctly American phenomena: Jesus standing alone, separate from God, separate from the church, separate from the history of doctrine and dogma.... This Jesus, Jesus as icon, as an always available superhero, could take on whatever form the dominant American popular culture needed him to.

Even as the golden haired, savior with the Northern European features started to be replaced by a diversity of images that reflected the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that began to come forth as early as the 1960's, little to nothing about those images had anything to do with the "real" Jesus.

So he looked like what we needed him to.

Yet if he was so mutable, so able to change his features to suit what we needed him to be...was there any "truth" there?

You could find a black Jesus, a muscular Jesus, a hippie, Jesus with a creepy "come-hither" look, and on and on. There is even a famous painting of a black "female" Jesus.

It was still rare for any of the newer images of Jesus to have much or anything to do with who or what he might have looked like or any of the many understandings of who he was for his first century followers....

Skeptics wondered if there was any truth to be found. Is it all made up? If it is, is it alright for any of us who care to, to just pick out what we need to be true?

How could some UU's in the light of this sort of skepticism call themselves Christian? Why would some UU's secretly or even boldly...if they dared...claim to be UU and Christian?

Aren't we the reasonable people who search for the truth?

(You know these days, it just didn't happen if there is no video evidence!)

Look on the cover of your order of service!

Not very long very forensic anthropologists decided to find "the truth". They gathered data from skeletal remains from Jesus' time frame and where he was raised. Then they used computer graphics and all the latest technology to create an image that is the best we can "accurately" show what Jesus and the people of his time and situation looked like.

What do you think?

How do you feel about this guy?

Is this a Jesus you could admire?

I am guessing this image might be shocking for some of you. Or maybe it isn't because you stopped thinking about Jesus a long time ago. You never believed so much of what seemed so unbelievable about the guy...and any relationship with him is in the distant past. Or you never had a relationship with him in the first place.

But maybe you wonder if there is something there...especially when you admire people like Martin Luther King, Jr. who found something immensely powerful in the example of this guy.... And how he lived.

No matter how we might feel ...Jesus won't go away...

In the pamphlet "The Faith of a UU Christian" the Rev. Stephen Kendrick says; "Nothing has ever been simple about Jesus. He confounded and confused people in his own time, and so it is no wonder UU's today are still wrestling with him, his message, and the tradition that claims him as a God."

He goes on to say; "...I believe that people who are attracted to a place of free faith, spiritual seeking, and non-dogmatic religion have much to gain by grappling with the legacy of this teacher whose power and charisma seem undimmed from two thousand years ago."

I'm sharing this image of Jesus to try to shake you up. If I can get some kind of reaction out of you...maybe, just maybe ...we can move together into a space where we can get some distance from our assumptions...about what we have been taught in the past or what we vaguely assume we know...

Some space in which to move away from where we have been, to stand in the in-between...

It is this space....where you may be able to give your religious imagination some freedom...freedom to move.....

To get there you've got to smash some idols...

For, even though they can and do serve great purposes...they can also obscure our perception of the "real thing"...

Icons, created by humans to point to the sacred, can become the sacred. It is like mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon.

We come from a religious tradition that guards against that. Those Unitarians that had a hand in creating Jesus as the American Icon, meant well by cutting and pasting the gospels...taking out all the unbelievable miracles, removing all the inconsistencies...removing what couldn't be true according to their understanding of reality. They were smashing idols.

We have some of our own to destroy...

Many of us of a certain background or of a particular generation did that with Christianity. It couldn't be the faith for us, because too much was unbelievable...didn't ring true.

Jesus may be making a comeback.

Jesus may be making a comeback among UU's.

This forensic anthropologist rendering you have in your hand depicts a simple, working class man.

This rendering you have in your hand may be quite nearly accurate...

If it is, or if it might be...does that make a difference for you?

Nothing has ever been simple about Jesus. There is very, very little "proof", other than accounts written by those who believed in him, that he even existed.

What he might mean to you, or to the person sitting next to you is and probably always will be a matter of faith. The holy work we ought to be doing is not precluding what our faith journeys might move us to believe. What we ought to be doing is freeing ourselves from whatever keeps us stuck in place. Sometimes, we get stuck in the business of rejecting what doesn't sound right or feel logical. Searching for what feels right and what brings love and justice is important spiritual work. UU's have for too long gotten stuck in the place of rejecting the unbelievable miracles of Christianity. We have for too long gotten stuck in the place of rejecting the unreasonable doctrines and dogmas of Christianity.

The work that we ought to be doing is not just freeing ourselves, but also moving into a place where once freed we then can creatively imagine what new symbols or not yet seen images might better channel our spiritual yearnings.

Martin Luther King, Junior was a good-looking man. He was a fabulous preacher. But adoring him is like mistaking the finger for the moon.

What if Jesus looked like a common, rough working man? What if his hair was unwashed, his skin ruddy from too much sun. What if his nose and his brow were thick?

Would you adore him? Want to hear what he has to say?

What if this man in this picture said to you: "Did you feed the hungry? Visit the widows? Go see the prisoners?"

Would you find a way not to listen? ...not to see? ...not to do what is asked of you?